

Belgian burqa ban comes into force

Paul Bond
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On July 23, Belgium implemented a legal ban on wearing the Islamic burqa in public. Under this anti-democratic measure any woman wearing a burqa in public can be fined €137.50 (nearly \$200) and faces up to seven days in jail.

The ban targets those who, without legal exemption, appear in places accessible to the public with their faces masked or hidden entirely or in part in such a manner that they cannot be identified. This is universally understood as an attack on Muslim veils. The legal exemptions apply only to those who are masked “due to work regulations or who have obtained a police order for festive occasions”.

Denis Ducarme, an MP from the francophone liberal MR party that drafted the bill, said it was “a question of public safety”. He insisted that the state should be able “to identify [people] in the streets for security reasons”. He said the legislation was aimed against the risk of women becoming “slaves to a question of religion”, describing Muslim veils as “just ... sectarian behaviour imported from Pakistan, Afghanistan ... it’s not an obligation in the Koran”.

Daniel Bacqueline (MR), who proposed the bill, said it was necessary to forbid the wearing of clothes that “totally mask and enclose” the wearer. He described wearing the burqa as “not compatible with an open, liberal, tolerant society”. Peter DeDecker of the Flemish separatist NVA saw the ban as a way of defending “our fundamental principles of the enlightenment”.

Such comments stand reality on its head. While hypocritically praising itself as “tolerant” and “liberal,” the Belgian ruling class is promoting a racially motivated law granting broad new powers to the state and trampling basic democratic rights.

Two Muslim women who wear veils have launched a legal challenge to the ban. Their lawyer, Ines Wouters, told press they considered the law “a disproportionate intrusion into fundamental rights such as the freedom of religion and expression”. Belgian Muslims have suggested the law will force veiled women to stay at home, thereby excluding them from society.

The ban was first voted through by Belgium’s lower house in April 2010. It had cross-party support. There were no votes against, and only two abstentions. The measure could not be implemented because of the collapse of the interim ruling coalition, following the withdrawal of the MR’s Flemish sister party the Open VLD.

MR reintroduced the bill early this year. MR insisted on the need for a national ban after judges in January scrapped a local ban imposed in a district of Brussels. In April the bill was voted again. It was passed 136-1 with two abstentions. The sole vote against came from Eva Brems of Groen!, the Flemish Greens. The abstentions were members of the francophone Green party Ecolo. The Greens had, however, previously supported the original proposal. Groen! MP Stefaan van Hecke told the BBC that “it’s important that we see each other when we speak to each other”.

The Belgian ban clearly has the character of a right-wing provocation. Belgium has about 450,000 Muslims in a total population of around 10.5 million. Only a very small number of these, possibly as few as 30, wear full-body veils. Most reports suggest only between “a few dozen” or at most 100 women will be directly affected.

The fact that so few women are directly affected underscores the trumped-up character of the anti-burqa hysteria. The form of dress adopted for religious reasons by a tiny number of women is being falsely presented as a serious security question and threat to society, while the ban’s anti-democratic content is passed over in silence.

So broad is the description of face covering that the legislation could be used against any masked protesters. Anti-war demonstrators have frequently worn George Bush masks or Tony Blair masks. If they do so in Belgium, they can now be arrested.

The ultimate target of the burqa ban is the rising popular opposition to the economic crisis and social cuts. Belgian economic growth has slowed over 2011, and the credit rating service Standard & Poor’s refused in June to change its negative assessment of Belgium’s AA+ rating.

It said this reflects a one-in-three chance the country's rating would be downgraded over a period of six months to two years.

Belgium is the third most indebted country in the eurozone, and its ongoing failure to establish a government coalition is causing anxiety in financial quarters.

Belgium has been without a government for more than 400 days. The contending parties have failed to reach agreement. Elio de Rupo, leader of the French-speaking Socialist Party, has just announced that eight parties are prepared to enter talks to form a government. The political complexion of that government is expressed in the near unanimous decision of the Belgian political elite to introduce the burqa ban.

The Belgian ban is part of a broad anti-Muslim campaign developing throughout Europe. Similar anti-burqa bans have been passed in France and discussed in Italy, Switzerland, the Netherlands and elsewhere. The French legislation, the result of a two-year campaign by the Sarkozy government, was part of a broader effort to make racist attacks on Muslims under cover of defending women's rights and secularism. It followed the 2004 ban on headscarves in French public schools.

European-wide moves to demonise Islam aim to divide the working class and undermine opposition to imperialist wars in countries with large Muslim populations. Belgian forces have been deployed in Afghanistan, and Belgium is currently providing air and naval support to NATO actions against Libya.

The burqa ban demonstrates the extent to which extreme right-wing tendencies have been welcomed into the political mainstream. Overt racism is no longer confined to the political periphery. It has become respectable.

Geert Wilders' right-wing populist Freedom Party is now the third largest party in the Dutch parliament. He made agreement to a burqa ban and other anti-immigrant measures a condition of his entering the coalition government.

Wilders has said that the Dutch burqa ban may come into force as early as next year. He has been able to win the support of broad sections of the Dutch political establishment, who have been attempting to legislate on the burqa since 2005.

The far-right xenophobic Flemish separatist Vlaams Belang (formerly Vlaams Blok, VB) has welcomed the ban as "just the first step". Party leader Filip Dewinter, who is chair of "Cities against Islamisation", describes Islam as "a threat to our European values and our western

way of life".

In his statement on the promulgation of the ban, Dewinter points to the political character of the move, speaking of "the pioneering role" of parties like VB. The cross-party support for the ban emphasises the extent to which VB have been able to set the political agenda for the whole ruling class.

Elsewhere in the statement Dewinter writes chillingly of his hope that the ban, which he calls a "symbolic victory", may lead to "the reduction and forcing back of Islam". His stated aim is to "undo the recognition and subsidizing of Islam".

Previously, Dewinter has honoured Flemish SS collaborators and neo-Nazis. More recently he has told the Israeli paper *Ha'aretz* that he sees the State of Israel as an "outpost for our Western society" against Islam. He told an American-Jewish weekly he did not use the word "xenophobia", adding: "If it absolutely must be a phobia, let it be Islamophobia".

Such views are shared throughout VB. Tanguy Veys, a VB MP, was one of the email recipients of Oslo killer Anders Behring Breivik's manifesto. Veys sought to distance himself somewhat from Breivik's actions, as media commentators and politicians internationally sought to downplay Breivik's political motivations and ties.

Veys said he thought Breivik was deranged, even as he was continuing to urge an immigration cap. In particular he insisted that "Islam is not compatible with the origins of Europe".

The promulgation of the burqa ban, and its broad acceptance among the Belgian political establishment, is part of a continuing rightward shift in European politics. It is an attack on democratic rights and should be opposed by all class-conscious workers.



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